

Plus ça change?

by Thea Harvey

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Throughout human history war hawks have argued that improved technology will make war safer, at least for "our" side. And men have insisted that, in this case only, war is the only answer to settle this problem (whatever this problem might be). Technology, strategy and politics have been interlinked since the discovery of the wheel gave Sumerian warriors the advantage of speed and maneuverability over their opponents.

So has anything really changed in the last 4000 years? In this issue of EPS Quarterly we take a look at modern conflict. Have new technologies really changed anything as is argued by those who wield them? Have changes in the geo-political situation changed the way strategies are planned or wars are fought?

President Bush claims that we have a unique new capacity to wage quick, decisive and clean wars. The argument seems to be that using new technologies, such as GPS-guided targeting systems, the risk and cost are so low that the old constrictions no longer apply. It's true that during the "active combat" phase of the war in Iraq, the casualty rate for Americans was very low. But the number of strikes was not. It looks like cheap and fast simply allows us to strike more often.

As Carl Conetta discusses in his article, "Is there a New Warfare," there is an additional danger in believing that new technology has changed the face of warfare. One can now make the argument that war is so cheap, fast and precise, so inconsequential, as to no longer need to be relegated to the realm of "last resort." This is indeed a change in thinking about how war is justified. Fortunately, I think that not very many people are buying it. Concurrent with developments in military technologies, developments in communications technologies keep the horrors of war present in enough minds; reminding those who care to pay attention that real lives are being destroyed.

Another school claiming that the nature of war is changing talks about a new generation of warfare. Since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), nation states have exercised a legal monopoly on the use of armed force. But that world is breaking down. We appear to be returning to the situation that characterizes most of human experience, where both states and non-states wage war. In so-called Fourth Generation warfare, at least one side is something other than a military force organized and operating under the control of a national government, and one that also transcends national boundaries. The era of tightly controlled and controllable war seems to have lasted only a few hundred years. But this "new" warfare, in which the enemy is often unseen, surprisingly conforms statistically with conventional wars. In his article, "Is Terrorism World War III," Philip Ball shows us that casualty and other conflict statistics are remarkably similar in this new generation.

However, something substantive has been changing in the last few years. Not fueled by new technologies or changes in war fighting strategies, but by building structures for international cooperation. As Gareth Evans shows in our leading article, "Conflict or Co-existence," the number and intensity of conflicts worldwide has gone down in the last decade. This came as a surprise to me when I first heard it a few months ago. Lack of war does not make the news. Especially when the world's only superpower is involved in a war, and when one lives in that country, the world doesn't look like a very peaceful place. And there is always news of conflicts that might break out any minute (North Korea, Iran, etc.), creating more fear and making it harder to believe in peace and security.

ut in fact, despite all that, the very structures that EPS was formed to support are working. Our mission statement

calls for us to "to support efforts to create economic incentives for peaceful relations; to promote collective approaches to conflict and security problems; to encourage the submission of international disputes to negotiation, arbitration, judicial settlement, the United Nations or other multinational institutions for the settlement of controversies." It is immensely gratifying to have it borne out that the instincts of our founders were correct, and that the work which we are a part of is helping to create a more peaceful world.

Economists for Peace and Security

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